Who Obeys- You or Your Child ?

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This pamphlet explains: (1) the nature of obedience, (2) its source of obligation, (3) the duty it imposes on parent and child, and (4) the problem of training children to obedience in a world so widely in revolt against authority.

WHO OBEYS—YOU OR YOUR CHILD?

THOMAS E. TOBIN, C.SS.R.

DEAR BILL AND MARY:

In a recent letter (*The Art of Child Discipline*) we discussed the principles that should guide you in training your daughter, Geralyn.

The problem of *obedience* was mentioned; but space did not allow for sufficient development of this important idea. I would like now to supply this by explaining: (1) the nature of obedience, (2) its foundation, (3) the obligations it imposes on parents and children, and (4) the practical difficulties of training children to obedience in a world so widely in revolt against authority.

UNPOPULAR WORD

Obedience is an idea which many moderns would like to ignore. For instance, a well-known book on child psychology which I consulted in preparing these notes contained only a few sentences on obedience. Another standard text book did not even mention the word "obedience" in the index.

We often run into sentences such as the following from a recognized work on child psychiatry: "Complete obedience is the expression of pathologic submissiveness resulting from suppression of spontaneity and initiative . . . a perfectly obedient child is one who has been crushed, whose tremendous sense of guilt has paralyzed the natural drive for self-assertion."

Arnold Toynbee, a prominent non-Catholic historian, comments: "Obedience is indisputably one of the cardinal principles of medieval western Christian society; it was indisputably thrown over when our secular modern western society broke out of its religious chrysalis; and

indisputably this modern society is now in grave difficulties."

REVOLT AGAINST AUTHORITY

The modern world has to a great extent rejected the idea of authority, and therefore of obedience. In the early Christian ages, the authority of God, the Church, the state, and the parent was accepted, even though not always obeyed.

The first break came with the rejection of the authority of the Church by the so-called Protestant Reformers. They declared that in religious matters man owed obedience to no one except God, that each individual had the right to interpret the Bible as he thought best, and that each man's private conscience was the sole judge of right and wrong. Little by little this revolt against authority extended to other areas—to civil, educational, and family matters.

It has been left to our own period to complete the revolt by a widespread rejection of the authority of God. The atheistic Communist denies that there is a

God, and opposes all religion as the opium that lulls people to close their eyes to the material world. The modern pagan lives as though there was no God to Whom he is responsible for his actions.

DEMOCRACY AND AUTHORITY

This modern trend against the acceptance of authority is very common in liberal circles in the United States where it is cloaked under the term "democracy." This word is often misused to convey the idea that every man has a right to think what he pleases without any consideration of objective truth; to speak or write what he wishes without consideration of charity, justice, or the common welfare; to do what he desires without regard for moral right or wrong.

This so-called democratic trend against authority has swept into the home. Treatises are written about democracy in family life. Suggestions are made that important family matters should be decided by majority vote of the members. So many parents obey their children that

they give the appearance of believing that they have received their authority from the votes of these children. They act like anxious politicians who know that their continuance in office depends upon not offending their constituents.

TEEN-AGERS AND OBEDIENCE

This modern reversal of roles is seen especially in the relation between teen-agers and their parents. Don't misunderstand me. I like teen-agers. I think that the vast majority of them have good sense. I do not think that the modern generation is worse than their parents were in their teens.

However, there is a growing tendency, which I consider unhealthy, to treat teen-agers as a class apart, especially in the matter of obedience. So much emphasis has been placed in modern books on the danger of awakening rebellion in adolescents by over-strictness, that many modern parents are confused. They are afraid to discipline their teen-agers; they feel that they must treat them very gently lest

they turn out to be juvenile delinquents. They give in to the wishes of their children and abandon the demand for obedience.

There are, indeed, dangers in too great strictness; but there are equally grave dangers in too great leniency. Kindness and love must be tempered with firmness. Teen-agers must be trained to recognize that, like all the rest of the human race, they are now, and during all their life will be, subject to authority in many forms—the authority of parents, of Church, of state, and of God. They must learn to understand the foundation upon which all authority rests, its necessity for human life, and the wisdom and obligation of submitting the individual's personal desires to the just commands of superiors.

AUTHORITY FROM GOD

A modern popular book defines authority as "an influence commanding respect and confidence." This is only a half-truth, and, like so many half-truths,

obscures the real nature of the thing defined.

Authority, properly defined, is a moral power received from God by which the one endowed with authority has a right to command, and those subject to authority have the obligation to obey. Respect and confidence are merely the consequences of the possession and right exercise of authority.

All authority comes from God. In their basic nature, rights, obligations, and destiny, all men are equal. Hence no man of himself has a right to command other men.

However, man has been created by God to live in society. He has needs of body and soul that can be satisfied only in group living. He requires food, clothing, and shelter for his body; he needs instruction in truth and love for his soul. He has talents in the arts and sciences that he can develop only with and through others. Man would be stunted in his growth without the assistance that he receives from his fellow men.

Since God destined man to live in society, he also destined him to be subject to legitimate authority. For without authority social living is impossible. Only through authority can the actions of the various members of society be directed to the common welfare. Without authority, there would be only anarchy and chaos. Hence it is clear that God, Who has created man for social living, wills that he obeys the just commands of authority, without which social living is impossible.

Parents, then, have authority over their children from God Who made the human family the basic unit of society.

Your human love established the society of your family; but God made the rules which govern the nature and functioning of that family. You freely chose marriage; but you must also accept the laws that go with marriage. When you become a parent, you receive the right and duty to educate your children. The children, in turn, have the duty of obedience. The Fourth Commandment, therefore, merely states a law of nature

which would be evident even without God telling us in a direct manner.

Once you are firmly convinced that your authority to command your children comes from God, you are in a position to impart this conviction to them. Once your children realize that authority comes from God, they will have the proper frame of mind to obey.

ROLE OF AUTHORITY

First of all, you must teach your children the role of authority in God's plan. The basic idea which you should impart is that God shares His authority with others and demands that we obey human persons who represent the divine authority.

There are several examples in the New Testament that exemplify how God works through others. Christ obeyed Mary and Joseph even though He was God and they were only human beings. In fact, the years of His life from 12 until 30 are summarized in a very simple

phrase in the Gospel: *He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was subject to them;* and as a result of this He advanced *in wisdom and age and grace before God and men* (Luke 2:51, 52).

Christ obeyed Caiphas, the lawful representative of God in the true religion of the day. Caiphas had tried to make Jesus talk, but was unable to do so. Finally he commanded Him, by his power as high priest, to respond. Even though Christ knew that His response would bring about His death, He did answer because He respected, not the person of Caiphas, but his position as the representative of God's authority (cf. Matt. 26:63). It is a very good lesson that the power of authority does not come from the goodness or wisdom of the person, but from the omnipotence of God.

There is another fine example of God's way of dealing with men in the Acts of the Apostles. Saul was on the road to Damascus with power to ferret out and persecute all those who followed Christ.

While on the journey he was blinded by a bright light and struck from his horse. He heard a voice: *"Saul, Saul, why dost thou persecute Me?"* He asked: *"Who art thou, Lord?"* The voice declared: *"I am Jesus, whom thou art persecuting."* Saul, trembling and amazed, then said: *"Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" And the Lord said to him, "Arise and go into the city, and it will be told thee what thou must do"* (Acts 9:1-19).

We might have imagined that since Christ was there with Saul He would have told him in detail what He wanted him to do. But Jesus merely commanded him to go into the city of Damascus and someone else would communicate to him what God wished him to do. Children can easily understand from this example that others do really share in the authority of God. Just as God used Ananias to direct Saul, so He uses you to guide your daughter, Geralyn. Saul obeyed Christ when he followed the directions of Ananias; Geralyn obeys Christ when she obeys you!

RESPECT AUTHORITY YOURSELF

If you wish Geralyn to respect your authority, you must show her the example of respect for all authority. You cannot be a rebel against authority and expect your daughter to be obedient to you. Sometimes we find that those who are the most rebellious against all authority demand a blind and unquestioning obedience from those under them. They seem to forget that there is a higher authority to which they are subject. They do not obey those over them, but they expect all those under them to obey without question.

CIVIL AUTHORITY

You must show respect for the laws of the state in which you live. You should not, for example, violate the speed laws and train your daughter to keep a lookout to warn you of radar or patrol cars. If she sees you attempting to lie or bribe your way out of a traffic ticket, she loses respect for the law. She must be trained to regard the law and law enforcers as

representatives of God Who wishes us to obey them. Signs which forbid littering the highways have value as regulations made by those in authority. A child is very perceptive and quickly sees the difference between what you say and what you do. Every act of disobedience that she sees you commit makes it easier for her to disobey you.

CHURCH AUTHORITY

Respect for authority includes respect for priests and bishops, who are charged with the spiritual care of your family, and will have to answer to God on judgment day as to how they fulfilled this obligation. Being human, they may at times have different ways of thinking and acting than you. They will also have their human faults and sins. But remember, they have tremendous burdens in building and maintaining the parish church and school. Whether they like it or not, they must remind the parishioners in some way of their financial obligations to the parish. They can even become frantic

when they see themselves unable to meet the payment on the debt and the running expenses of the parish.

Not all priests are eloquent preachers, efficient administrators, and social successes. But they do hold authority from God, and God expects you to look beyond the human weakness to see the divine authority. Christ did this before Caiphas, and He will give you the grace to see the supernatural realities behind the natural defects. In some homes there is a great spirit of criticism of everything that the priest does or does not do. This is wrong and undermines all authority.

SCHOOL AUTHORITY

When you send Geralyn to school, you give the teachers authority over her in school matters. Once you have shared this authority you must back up the teachers, and not side with your daughter against them. Hear their side of the story which is so often different than the one told by the child. Talk with the teacher.

Even if you do not agree, yet do not openly criticize her so that Geralyn will find it difficult to obey and learn. Explain that it is a part of life to have to get along with people whom we do not like and to obey those with whom we do not agree.

NOT A DEBATE

Since obedience is based upon the God-given authority of the parents, it is not a matter for debate between parents and child. Obedience is not an acceptance of better reasons, but a submission to lawful authority. Sometimes parents imbued with democratic ideals feel that they must explain everything to their children and not expect them to obey unless they understand the reasons for the command. But obedience does not rest upon the force of the reasons, but upon the authority which gives an order. In fact, the reasons for a particular action may at times not be as good as the reasons brought against the action by the

child; but so long as the command is not immoral the child should obey.

It is true that because you are older and have had more experience you are probably wiser than your child. In this regard I recall the story told by Mark Twain about his own relationship with his father. He said: "When I was 16 years old I thought my father was a very ignorant sort of man, but when I became 21 I was surprised to learn how much he had learned in those 5 years."

You should listen to objections and difficulties put up by your daughter, but after considering them, it is up to you to see that she obeys what you have decided. You must listen, but not argue with her. You are not two equals who agree upon a common action, but a parent and child, one who gives the orders, and one who obeys. When she tells you that other children's mothers and fathers allow them to do this or that, do not be swayed. Once she detects a weak point in your armor she will make you her obedient servant!

NOT A CONTEST OF WILLS

Sometimes we find parents who descend to the level of their children so that it is a matter of two people struggling for supremacy. I have seen mothers argue with their teen-age daughters and show all the emotional immaturity of a teen-age girl in the struggle. It becomes a supreme contest of wills to see which is the stronger. But authority does not depend upon your strength or on your persistency in wearing down your daughter. In any battle of strength and any test of time she will probably win as she is younger and stronger. You will be worn down in the war of attrition.

This is not a matter that is decided as by two girls who cannot agree which movie to see. They argue, and neither agrees with the reasons of the other. Finally the girl with the strongest will, who is most tenacious in her determination, will win. You must always remember that you are parents, and not a big brother and sister to your daughter. You are not her equals, but her superiors, and

must never forget this basic relationship. You are lost once you descend to her level.

LOVE AND AUTHORITY

I have emphasized the point that obedience is not a debate of minds nor a contest of wills because this basic truth needs restating in our day. But there is one great quality that will make certain that obedience is not too difficult for Geralyn. This quality is *love*. If she knows that you love her and that your commands are motivated by love, she will obey readily. This atmosphere of mutual love places obedience in its proper place. If Geralyn loves you, she will obey with promptitude; if you love her, you will not expect unreasonable obedience from her.

FOR HER SAKE

Love reminds you that authority is not given to you for your own welfare. It is a sacred trust that God has shared

with you to care for your child. Authority must not be used for your own ease and comfort, nor merely to inflate your ego nor to have someone cringe under your power. You must not be overbearing or harsh in your attitude toward your child.

The standard for all authority has been set once and for all by Christ when He tells us: *"You know that those who are regarded as rulers among the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you. On the contrary, whoever wishes to become great shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be the slave of all; for the Son of Man also has not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"* (Mark 10:42-45).

St. Augustine explains the role of authority in these words: "Superiors hold a position of authority not for the sake of wielding authority, but in order that they may be of service." The Pope, who holds supreme authority in the Church

of Christ, humbly calls himself: "the Servant of the Servants of God." The example of Christ and of His Vicar on earth will make it easier for you to use your authority in the loving service of your child.

There is much more that I could add to these reflections on obedience; but I have, I hope, made clear the nature of the authority that God has given you. Modern parents and children need a better appreciation of the fundamental nature of obedience as the submission to lawful authority for the sake of God. Some persons never reach maturity because they are always in opposition to the demands of authority. They remain childish adults and never achieve happiness because they are always against the way that the Lord runs the world.

Sincerely,
Father Tobin

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